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Reflections, water, architecture, art and co-creativity

Citation for published version:

Wiszniewski, D 2016, Reflections, water, architecture, art and co-creativity. in I Panneels (ed.), *Reflections: glass: water: art: science*. Ampersand, Edinburgh and Blurb, Sunderland, pp. 30-43.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Published In:

Reflections: glass: water: art: science

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WATER, ARCHITECTURE, ART AND CO-CREATIVITY

*Art and Architecture are the products of **collective labour**. Art and architecture have the capacity for investing ethical hope through spatialising something of our **subjectivity**.*

I have begun this reflection on our Festival of Architecture event, Reflection, with two seemingly opposing statements on what we may think the purpose of art/architecture to be. I will elaborate briefly through this text how each statement can be understood but, importantly, also how they can be considered to be more complimentary than their obvious differences might otherwise suggest. I will also take the opportunity to show how the theme of Reflection, especially pertaining to the material practices of art and architecture as they have considered the materiality of water and glass, addresses and offers some way of coming to terms with the seeming contradictions between art and architecture and the individual and collective enterprises of each.

These reflections are offered not so much to make any major claims about how worthwhile our event was but how important it is to bring different expertise together in events that have no instrumental objective. This is not to say that what we have put together an event with no objective beyond the inner activities of the group. Everybody practices for a range of reasons. Their settings are usually an aspect of their reasons. Our hope was simply to place in proximity a range of committed practitioners at various levels of experience from varied but related disciplines who all share commitment towards material production that traverses the very line that art necessarily has to cross – the line between the necessary and unnecessary. We determined to create a setting whereby a range of fellow producers/carers could share what they actually care about and how they usually go about producing/caring and sharing. For me, this was an exercise in caring for the environment, material production and the communicative potential of abstraction – in other words to re-affirm or at least to operate an experiment in coming to terms with “the abstract collective essence as

the basis of art” and perhaps even how art operates as a constituent part of how community can develop. The outputs of this event express how the gathered group care about our environment, how they make things for a specific environment but also, as importantly, how an environment creates the context for how people may co-create and form themselves, at least and perhaps most importantly, temporarily, as a community: oscillating between individuality and collectivity.

I have emboldened the terms that hold the two seemingly contradictory positions: we are placing in the same frame both the suggestions that art is a **collective** output and art is an aspect of **individual** existence. In other words, on one hand there is a claim that art and architecture are made by and for many people. However, on the other hand there is a claim that it takes the act of an artist (or architect, who, for the sake of this short discussion, we can assume has very similar propensities towards the act of creation), a very specifically focussed individual, to make something that we can call artistic.

What is at stake in this contradiction is the fundamental question that troubles all art production: is art for the many or for the few? It can be claimed that it is a false question: either individuals and collectives are presumed to be aspects of each other and in making for ourselves we also make for others, hence, all art represents this unity; and/or, art is irreducible to such territorialisation because it transcends its material considerations. The first assertion has some substance. However, this latter assertion regularly comes with a formula: art is for art’s sake. That is, art is free from any claims upon it by individuals or groups. However, this, in my view, seems to exacerbate the tension the question holds. This assertion places art in the realm of mythology and simultaneously mythologises art production and artists. It can be argued that “art for art’s sake” really just simply shifts responsibility for the production of art: simultaneously, the responsibility for art moves towards would-be experts that frequently present themselves as wise or pious enough to understand what constitutes art, and

away from those who generally do not engage in artistic production and know insufficiently about such practices to offer anything other than mere opinion.

This fundamental difficulty, one might even call it the fundamental problem of the politics of art, also leads to the reductively bastardised but equally well-proliferated Kantian equation that art is about beauty and “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” However, this equation really doesn’t help very much either because it simultaneously gives the responsibility of art to everyone and to no one: it proposes art as an entirely subjective experience, subjecting collectivity either to the sum of individual egos or to the impenetrable Gnosticism of the connoisseurs. However, in such a vacuous social world of inability to collectively reason, conventionally the ‘institution’ and the ‘artist’ take up the polarity of the issue: on the one hand, society is supposed to grant the institution the privilege for navigating the mythological landscape of art on their behalf and trust that they get it right and hold

in high esteem all that should be considered collectively heroic and virtuous; on the other hand, the artist is liberated from any collective responsibility and granted the privilege of special insight and gift to act heroically and provide the virtuous with sufficient virtuosity. In other words, an abrogation of critical engagement with the question gives license to the institutions to operate curatorial agendas that are deemed to be good for the general un-informed public, whilst individuals who may find themselves incapable of accessing works are comforted by the authority given to them to make judgements based either on what they feel they are supposed to understand by it, on autobiographical experiences or some combination of the two. In this sense the artistic institution, conventionally, is no different from the political institution – it acts top down and limits any bottom up activity to what it deems appropriate, relegating everything the bottom offers as merely subjective, without expertise and without consensus.

Here I am reflecting on an event entitled *Reflections* where groups of architects and artists came together in a setting, The Haining, a Georgian house and grounds with a lake (designed and built c.1790 by a wealthy family – a political and culturally situated story in itself), now operating as a public amenity run by a charity for the benefit of the people of Selkirk in the Scottish Borders (yet another political and cultural story). A group of architects came from Edinburgh to the north (10 people); a group of glass artists came from Sunderland to the south (7 people). A third strand of creative energy came from a range of professional artists who operate within the territory of operation, local Scottish Borders’ communities (12). There were others who also came to participate in the group: for example, young film makers from a youth initiative in Edinburgh (3); art foundation students from the local Border’s College Art and Design Foundation (10); and at least one artist/photographer who operates from the studios in the refurbished stables of the Haining. The overall grouping of producer/carers

reflected on the theme of reflection: one might suggest a myopically intense mise-en-abyme of self-referential production (in the sense of art reflecting on art reflecting through art and the art of reflection).

Or was it so self-centred and hermetic? Was this gathering dealing with the fundamental question of the politics of art? Really, they were looking, ostensibly, at the relations between water (a theme presented by Wiszniewski) and glass (a theme presented by Panneels), coupled through the overarching theme of reflection, in the very nice but slightly faded Picturesque setting of the house, stables, dovecot, follies and lake (another political-cultural story, I mean notions of the Picturesque). On the face of it, it was a simple pretext: let’s do some glass works. This was a gathering of many constituencies: locally based artists either representing themselves or their local communities in the borders; and at least three institutions – the University of Edinburgh, the University of Sunderland and The Haining, with the

same questions as to whether the individuals in these groups were representing their own, their group leaders’ or their institutional interests. However, not that we actually set out a rule in order to surmount any territorial claims that might come from these constituencies, but there was a tacit understanding of a basic working rule in the art experiments: there was no top and no bottom to the groupings; and there was no top-down or bottom-up presumption to our productions. No teachers instructed and no students looked for instructions. Those who had some technical insights offered technical advice. However, no one predetermined what art was or what it ought to be. Everyone was guided by the event. Everybody was equally individually and relationally co-creative to a context, a theme and sub-theme of materials: we, the grouping of artists and architects, reflected at the material interface between situation, water and glass.

Returning to the two italicised statements that begin this reflection, they paraphrase two points the Italian political philosopher/activist Antonio Negri makes in a letter to his old ‘N’ Group artist conspirator Manfredo Massironi. The statement I place in inverted commas in the second paragraph also comes from Negri. My reflection is not a case of Negriphilia (apologies for the pun). I simply have an appreciation that his missive reflections and the history they refer to on the relationship of art to individual and collective production and reception provide a useful precedent for this reflection. Negri is well known for his reconstructed theorisation of factories and other workplaces as communities of sociality and cultural exchange and against them acting only as instruments of capitalist and corporate production with any would-be sociality steered from top-down as an extension of corporate branding. Members of our group may or may not have called upon any knowledge of Negri and those radical Italian and French thinkers and practitioners he calls upon to assist in their own individual and collective

productions, but I have reflected on this previously and hold something of this possible paradigm shift in mind when engaging in any art/architecture individual/collective practice. I would suggest Negri’s reflections have relevance for us at this event because we established ourselves as a collective of varied artists/architects and we engage in this very question whether or not we take it on directly. However, I fully appreciate the question of a possible paradigm shift in how we see the full network of political-cultural-econommic working relations is not yet fully embraced by our society, institutions and individuals and might never be a fully resolved matter. However, the question of a possible shift is clearly important and so charged that it affects how all practitioners operate and constituencies are formed and has historically worried some institutions to the extent that it constrains practices and even removes the liberty of those that take the question seriously enough to go against the conventional paradigms (Negri was incarcerated for four years in Italy between 1979-1983 and a further six years between 1997-

2003 – yet another political and cultural story).

I offer here a brief elaboration of something of his experience and insight that might point towards why our work at the Haining makes an important contribution to the theory and productions of inter-disciplinary practice. His insights are crucial to the themes of our reflections, but might even move beyond architects and artists working together to touch upon a working paradigm of community and what we can seriously consider as a ‘common’ of community.

What we can also see in these two opening statements is a further claim about art. This further claim I suggest can orient the way we work the relation between individual and collective production. Negri reminds us that art is art if it holds **an ethical function**. Many of us are aware of the complexities of dealing with art as politics. However, at the root of all politics is this ethical function. I think most artists know this at least intuitively. What drives

them to be artists? How we see ourselves in relation to others is the fundamental ethical question at the root of all politics. How many of us launch an ethical hope through our work? Perhaps we all do, whatever we think this ethical function is, and it is why we have the audacity to call ourselves artists? I would argue that so long as we launch an ethical hope and impart our skills in doing so we uphold an art, no mater its medium. I would suggest that not only does the trajectory of an ethical hope contribute to the definition of art it also marks a way for how we might traverse and navigate the necessary oscillatory dynamically shifting connections between individual and collective production.

Negri's reflections, and they are reflections because he is considering the work of the 'N' Group, the *Operaisti* and the *Autonomists*, in reverse, afterwards and afterwards, in the 1980s about the 1960s and 1970s, from a distance (from France, where he was in exile from Italy), through the rhetorical device of a letter (that is, with a

would-be but absent correspondent but, nonetheless, dialogical, where reflection on a would be answer is part of its method – and some would say the very same processes are employed in the production of art, whether individual or collective), and in the reflective brilliance brought to his own situation by conversations with others considering similar ethical issues (for example, those he calls the French Heideggerians, that is, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida).

I am not going to deal with this in sufficient detail here. However, in summary, what I suggest Negri points towards, as the ethical basis of his political philosophy, is a possible unification of and at least dialogue between the two great materialisms or experientialities: the unity of **empirical** measure (for example, as we can see in the machinic impersonal fabrications and reproducibility of the 'N' groups op-art) and politico-poetic **ontology** (for example, as we can see through the legacy of the *Operaisti* and *Autonomists* in the work of the Situationists,

like Constant Nieuwenhuys, or currently in some aspect of the Occupy movement, where the performative/ experiential dimension and material situation of the political artist and the works/events go hand in hand). In either philsopohical trajectory there is a commitment to an abstract process. Not everything can be directly representational. Communication is indirect as well as direct. However, rather than thinking about specific art production or some form of guiding aesthetic, I think what is more at stake here is a reconciliation between the collective and individual that we see in how an art project might bring together two traditionally conflicting philosophies: empiricism conventionally seeks objective measure as the unifying agency between different points of view; and phenomenology conventionally moves from idiolectic poetic language to present work, less as personal view-point, less representationally as something to be understood, and more as a simple experience and potential sociolectic opening (a move from private language to shared language – a communitarian act).

This working relationship between empiricism and phenomenology allows us to reflect on the measures and experiences we undertook in the Haining. We consider not only that the varied constituencies of the gathered interests deal with the political question, we also consider the two materials in question throughout the event embody it: glass and water. We claim not only what materials but also by how we work with materials naturally embeds an ethical dimension. Water and glass open ecological/environmental questions. I would argue they embed another fundamental question, of how we consider our relations to the world. Water and glass in our work mediate not only how we work together in the world but also how we work together with the world.

Glass is the material par excellence in architecture that simultaneously points us away from and towards our being-in-the-world. I offer the following quotation from the introduction to Vilém Flusser's essay on Rain to help elaborate and substantiate this point [Natural: Mind,

trans Rodrigo Novaes Maltez (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013)].

"The observation of rain through a window is accompanied by a sensation of coziness. Out there, the elements of nature are at play and their purposeless circularity turns as always. Whoever is caught in its circle is exposed to uncomfortable forces, a powerless part of its violent gyrations. In here, different processes are at play. Whosoever is inside directs the events. Hence the sensation of shelter: it is the sensation of one who is within history and culture contemplating the meaningless turbulence of nature. The drops that hit against the window [glass], projected forth by the fury of the wind but incapable of penetrating the room represent the victory of culture against nature. When I observe the rain through a window [glass], I not only find myself out of the rain, but also in a situation opposed to it. This situation characterizes culture: the possibility of a distanced contemplation of nature."

In his para-phenomenological analysis of the correspondence between culture and nature, Flusser outlines what is at stake in his opening to his own reflection on rain. Reflection on rain is a reflection on water, which is a reflection of the world on water, which is also a reflection on how glass acts to divide us or connect us to the water-ways of rain and how the water-ways of nature might reflect how we sit in nature. Glass has undergone great technological advances from the early stages of the twentieth century and has come to represent the modern condition of architecture and perhaps also, then, the modern condition per se. The modern condition might be described through the metaphor of glass: where we have brought the relationship between man and nature simultaneously to the largest expanse and thinnest of films that connect and disconnect us from Nature. Glass can dramatically place us in the midst of the dilemma of our willingness to be part of Nature or apart from it. Architects and artists are used to traversing this line through the traditions of their own disciplines.

However, fundamentally they reflect on a common issue. Glass occupies the between of man and nature; glass art plays in this abyss – naturally, it reflects it but really it is also suspended and suspends us within it. Glass is both natural and technological; it embodies the “abstract collective essence” as its medium.

I have been working on the theme of water for a few years, in Scotland, Sardinia and most recently in the context of India and its monsoon aqua-land-scape. My Indian experience of water has been the most dramatic: for example and quite obviously, immediately after arriving at my hotel in the Bombay Fort area, late August 2013, I went for a walk. In five minutes I had been soaked to the skin. It was very humid. Sticky. I was wet with sweat. The day went from brilliant sunshine to dark looming cloud in a matter of moments with a subsequent deluge. Streets became rivers in an instant. It is true they went back to streets again very quickly afterwards. However, it astonished me to think that here was a place that even

though it clearly has an abundance of water, it is a very wet place, there are regular reports in its newspapers of water shortages. There are tank-trucks everywhere removing and delivering water – in all shades from brown to clear. Historically Bombay was known for its beautiful “sweet” water. It’s *Mithi* river translates as such. It has great lakes in the North of its peninsula. Bombay is like many places in the world. Its relationship to water has somewhat soured.

My friends and academic colleagues Anuradha Mathur and Dilip da Cunha, who operate from the University of Pennsylvania and various institutions in India, take our relationship to water very seriously. They have been working on water from a sensibility developed through reconciling a deconstruction of western philosophy as it meets historically layered Indian spatial and philosophical practices. In opening the conversations on water at The Haining event, I borrowed from their recent presentation to us in the University of Edinburgh

to elaborate how we might try to forge a richer, deeper and temporally intelligent relationship with water. They began their lecture by invoking Paul Klee’s diagram from his notebooks (Volume 1, *The Thinking Eye*, [London: Lund Humphries, 1961] p.402). I sketched a version of it on the paving stones on the terrace between the garden room and the loch as a declaration of a possible point of departure for how the Haining event might begin to think water. I think Klee’s feeling and motion drawings are an inspiration not only for how we might take our lines for a walk, but maybe also for how we may take water for a walk and ourselves for a physical and conceptual walk through an aqua-land-scape. The artifice of the Picturesque loch/ lake beyond the ha-ha of the garden with its poisonous algae due to poor water flow was pertinent to this reflection (yet a further political and cultural story).

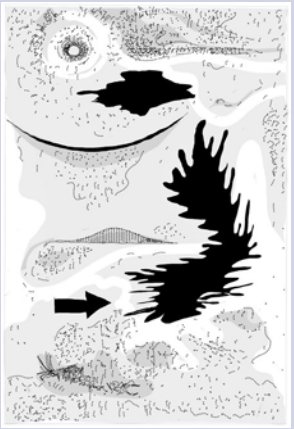


WATER CYCLE
Images: Kevin Greenfield

The diagram of the water cycle most of us understand and can call to mind from our early school years. It holds a paradigm that we may wish to re-consider. It is a cycle. It can begin at any point. 1. There are clouds. 2. Rain falls from clouds onto sloping hills. 3. Rain collects and form rivers that run to the sea. And 4., water evaporates from the sea and rises to form clouds. And so it goes on. What Klee wants us to think about is the motion as much as the lull of weather. He gives us a drawing of mixed weather (see fig. right). The mix of weather stirs our feelings. What Mathur and da Cunha want us to think about is as significant. They want us to reflect on how we see the world. They are concerned about how water has become a negative thing, a problem to be solved, Nature to be tamed. We have fixed our view of the world on only one of these processes and think of it as reality. Rather than perpetuate this absurdity of posing ourselves against nature they take their lead from Klee and suggest that we need to enter this world of temporal flux. They, as many of us, feel that we can no longer develop projects that only

seek to hold back water to fixed lines, draw our maps as though rivers have fixed edges, make rivers to conform to fixed edges and alongside which we can then build our cities, fronting the water as though it was either only an amenity of leisure or a commodity of production. Water is an ecology that propels all other ecologies. Mathur and da Cunha, like Klee, like ourselves at the Haining, begin this question through framing another question: recognising its temporal flux, how then do we draw water? At the Haining we complicated this question a little more. How do we use glass as a means for reflecting on water, for reflecting on how we might give measure to a deep and meaningful political-poetic ontology of an aqua-land-scape? Our productions offer no set answers to such questions. However, they at least launch work on a trajectory of ethical hope with commitment to “the abstract collective essence as the basis of art,” which I think exemplifies how an inter-disciplinary community can work to form themselves around ‘common’ values.

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MIXED WEATHER

Images: Dorian Wiszniewski after Klee





